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Sam Peckinpah As Film Auteur

by Jules Cherie

(Motion Picture Television 1113)

PREFACE

May I begin this paper on a personal note?

I am intrigued by a recurring theme that appears in some of Sam Peckinpah's films: the aging process and the resulting challenge of dealing with change.

I am presently 68 years old and certainly one of the oldest students at the College of DuPage. This is my third venture in the world of higher education and it has been much different than the first two.

I have also spent over four decades in a career that has undergone considerable change. And so I am now sometimes referred to as "old school." But to me "old school" is synonymous with "thorough." So to borrow a phrase from Pike Bishop in *The Wild Bunch*, "I wouldn't have it any other way."

I wish Sam Peckinpah were still alive. I would like to meet him. I think he would agree that one way of dealing with aging and change is to always try and do that which is right. But why is this the case? Is it to give more meaning to one's life as one recognizes that the end is much closer than the beginning? Or is it an attempt to try and make up for the mistakes of the past?

In any event, I would have liked to talk with Mr. Peckinpah about such things.

I

A BIOGRAPHICAL SNAPSHOT OF SAM PECKINPAH'S LIFE AND CAREER

On February 21, 1925, David Samuel "Sam" Peckinpah was born in Fresno, California. He was born into a family of lawyers and judges.¹ Pursuing a different career path, Sam became involved in the theater, directed plays, and obtained a master's degree from the University of Southern California.² He also obtained work as a stagehand at a television station then known as KLAC in Los Angeles, but was fired.³ He next obtained employment at CBS, but claimed to have been fired after missing work to take his wife to the hospital to give birth to their second child.⁴ Eventually Sam worked his way into the film industry, mentoring under director Don Siegel.⁵ Sam also started to write for television shows such as *Gunsmoke*, *Broken Arrow* and *Have Gun Will Travel*.⁶ He also developed a television series by the name of *The Westerner*, which ran briefly on

¹ Garner Simmons, *Peckinpah. A Portrait in Montage*, (New York Proscenium Publishers, Inc. 1998) 1-8.

² Bennetts, L (1984) *Sam Peckinpah Movie Director, Dies*. New York Times

³ Simmons, *Peckinpah. A Portrait in Montage*, 23.

⁴ Ibid 24

⁵ Ibid 25

⁶ Ibid 27-28

NBC.⁷ And although Sam directed some episodes of *The Westerner*, he first directed a feature film in 1961: *The Deadly Companions*.⁸ But Sam reached critical acclaim the following year with his second feature, *Ride The High Country*. And in 1969 he reached the pinnacle of his career with *The Wild Bunch*, now considered by the American Film Institute as being among the top 100 films of all time.⁹ Thereafter, Sam Peckinpah continued to make films, and later, music videos. He died in 1984 at the age of 59.¹⁰

II SAM PECKINPAH'S IMPORTANCE IN THE HISTORY OF FILM

Sam Peckinpah might be considered a *transitional* filmmaker. His career began with the more traditional filmmaking style of the 1950's and early 1960's, but with the abolition of the Production Code, everything changed. With Peckinpah, it was like freeing a tiger from its cage.

The MPAA ratings system went into effect in 1968. The following year, Sam Peckinpah brought *The Wild Bunch* to the screen, and with it, his foray into the world of graphically depicted violence. With *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah actually elevated brutal violence into an art form.

In an interview with Sam Peckinpah for Playboy magazine published in August of 1972, William Murray referred to Peckinpah as the "Picasso of Violence."¹¹ That seemed to be a title that Peckinpah eschewed. In fact, Peckinpah began his Playboy interview with this statement:

"All right, let's get it on. I promise to do my little number. But I'm not going to talk about violence."

But of course Peckinpah *did* discuss violence in that interview, although with the tone of a man who had been misunderstood. Peckinpah stated:

Most people don't even know what a bullet hole in a human body looks like. I want them to see what it looks like. The only way I can do that is by not letting them gloss over the looks of it, as if it were the seven-o'clock news from the DMZ. When people complain about the way I handle violence, what they're really saying is, "Please don't show me; I don't want to know; and get me another beer out of the icebox."¹²

Today, almost half a century later, Peckinpah's cinematic depictions of killing and carnage are still a frequent subject of discussion among film aficionados. In 2016 John Patterson, film columnist for The Globe stated:

⁷ Ibid 31-33

⁸ Ibid 36-40

⁹ <https://www.thegreatestfilms.com/List/American-Film-Institute/AFIs-100-Greatest-American-Movies-of-All-Time>

¹⁰ It is common knowledge that Sam Peckinpah had personal problems with relationships and with alcohol. But these will not be discussed in this paper. Whatever personal demons Sam Peckinpah might have struggled with, the quality of his work rose above them.

¹¹ William Murray, Playboy, Sam Peckinpah: Playboy Interview (August, 1972)

¹² Ibid

The Wild Bunch was a hand grenade throw under the tent-flap of America's assumption about violence and our culpability in it. It tore the increasingly bloody and reprehensive Vietnam war off the nightly news and hurled it like scarlet paint-pot all over the silver screen. The western was never the same again, nor was American Cinema, and nor was Sam Peckinpah.¹³

III SAM PECKINPAH AS AUTEUR

Peckinpah's films were typically male orientated. A common theme involved the struggles of men who were out of place in their environment. An example of this would be unchanged men living in changing times.

Many of his films were westerns, but unlike the traditional westerns of the past, Peckinpah's films involved characters with complex and conflicted personalities. The "heroes" of Peckinpah's westerns did not necessarily wear white hats. In some instances they could be considered anti-heroes.

Peckinpah historian and film editor, Paul Seydor, has compared Peckinpah's use of the western to the practice of William Shakespeare, who also reached into the past to tell his stories. With respect to Peckinpah and the western, Seydor writes:

...everything was there waiting for him: a repository of plots, characters, icons, conventions, settings and themes. He found, in sum, a whole language of myth, symbol and metaphor waiting to be exploited and capable of freeing his imagination to give form to its dictates, to express his feelings, thoughts and ideas in character, narrative, and drama in some of the most emotionally charged, sensually beautiful and mythically resonant images anyone has ever put on film.¹⁴

Peckinpah's style: he abandoned the "clean" violence of past films in favor of much more graphic and realistic depictions. In earlier films, characters shot by guns might drop to the ground and die, but rarely would they bleed. In Peckinpah's films they bled. And oh, how they bled! For example, in *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah placed thin slices of raw meat across the blood bags that the actors wore. This created the illusion of both blood and tissue being torn loose by bullets.¹⁵

Peckinpah also successfully turned violence into an art form by using multiple cameras to film the same scene at different speeds, thus allowing for standard action shots to be mixed with those of slow motion, intensifying the effect of the carnage. Peckinpah viewed his cinematic use of violence as a form of catharsis.¹⁶

A search for redemption was often a theme at the core of Peckinpah's films, particularly the westerns.¹⁷ But perhaps most important, Sam Peckinpah claimed that all his films were autobiographical.¹⁸

¹³ John Patterson, 'Bloody' Sam Peckinpah: wasted, insane and indestructibly pure. The Guardian, March 30, 2016.

¹⁴ Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah. The Western Films. A Reconsideration*, (Chicago and Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1999) 177

¹⁵ Marshall Fine, *Bloody Sam. The Life and Films of Sam Peckinpah*, (Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1991) 142

¹⁶ William Murray, Playboy, Sam Peckinpah: Playboy Interview (August, 1972)

¹⁷ Seydor, Peckinpah. *The Western Films. A Reconsideration*, Introduction by David Weddle. xiv

¹⁸ David Weddle, *If They Move...Kill 'Em. The Life and Times of Sam Peckinpah* (New York, Grove Press 1994), 396

IV REPRESENTATIVE FILMS

A. *Ride The High Country* (1962)

In *Ride The High Country*, a western, Peckinpah explored the theme of aging men living in a world that was undergoing rapid change during the early days of the 20th Century. The film also dealt with violence and redemption.

The protagonist of the story was an aging former lawman by the name of Steve Judd. The Judd character, also presented as a person with a name and a reputation, was purportedly patterned after Sam Peckinpah's own father.¹⁹

In the opening scene Judd rides a horse onto the main street of a western town, unaware that he is about to interfere with a race between horses and a camel. He is promptly chastised by a uniformed police officer, who refers to Judd as an "old man." Moments later he is called an "old timer" as he narrowly misses being run over by an early model automobile.

Judd then applies for work to carry a gold shipment down a mountain, and is told that they were expecting "a younger man." He gets the job anyway and is thereafter joined by his former partner Gil Westrum, of similar age, and a young cowboy by the name of Heck Longtree. Judd and Westrum are then portrayed as experienced and knowledgeable whereas the younger Longtree comes off as a naïve know-it-all.

The film has moments of violence and there are gunfights. Characters are shot and they actually bleed from their wounds, although the level of violence does not approach that which would occur in Peckinpah's later films.

There is also redemption among the main characters as Judd recalls the mistakes of his past and voices a desire "to enter [his] house justified." And Westrum, who at one point intended to steal the gold shipment, abandons his ill motives to come to the aid of Judd during the film's final gunfight.

B. *The Wild Bunch*

It is for this film that Peckinpah is most remembered. Some of the same themes from *Ride The High Country* are used here, but honed to perfection. Most important, the chains of the old Production Code have been removed. The resulting film is flawless.

As in *Ride The High Country*, the main characters in *The Wild Bunch* are unchanged men in changing times. These are cowboys – outlaws – trying to survive in the remnants of the old west during the second decade of the 20th Century. The protagonist is Pike Bishop, leader of an outlaw gang, played by an aging William Holden. It has been said that in playing the role of Pike Bishop, Holden sought to imitate Peckinpah himself.²⁰

The film, particularly the climax, is incredibly violent, establishing Peckinpah's trademark. The film would use 239 rifles, shotguns, revolvers and automatics and over 90,000 rounds of blank ammunition.²¹ The production actually ran out of fake blood during the first day of shooting.²²

¹⁹ Ibid 200

²⁰ Ibid 336-337

²¹ Ibid 332

²² Ibid 332

Major shootouts were filmed with six cameras operating at different frame rates to create the film's now-famous "slow motion" bloodbath.²³

But above all, the film was about redemption. The Wild Bunch gang, notwithstanding the sins of their past, take on an army. But by sacrificing their own lives, they save the village of a fallen comrade from the wrath of a cruel Mexican general.

Peckinpah knew that he achieved greatness with *The Wild Bunch*. When the film wrapped, he went to the corner of a sound stage and cried.²⁴

C. *Straw Dogs*

Unlike *Ride The High Country* and *The Wild Bunch*, *Straw Dogs* does not involve aging men struggling to deal with change. But it *does* portray a man who finds himself living in a foreign, hostile environment. In this case the protagonist is a seemingly timid American college professor residing with his much younger wife in a small English town that is unwelcoming to strangers.

The professor is David Sumner, played by Dustin Hoffman. Sumner is married to Amy, who is from the town. And aside from physical attraction, it is difficult to imagine how these two ever got together. David is older than his wife and far more educated. In contrast, Amy is an immature child residing in a young woman's body.

The style of the film is Sam Peckinpah's signature violence. There is a rape scene that is so unsettling and difficult to watch that it resulted in rating and censorship issues. But the climax of the film is the siege upon the home in which David and Amy reside. David successfully defends against the attack, with violence, but in a most unconventional manner. He uses wires, glass from broken windows, boiling oil and a mantrap as his weapons of destruction.

The theme of redemption may also play a part in *Straw Dogs*. Sumner's resort to violence saves not only the lives of himself and his wife, but also that of the town simpleton, who had been hiding in Sumner's home.

Straw Dogs was very loosely adapted from the novel, *The Siege at Trencher's Farm*.²⁵ But was the David Sumner character inspired by an actual human being? Author David Weddle has opined that Sumner may have been based upon Sam Peckinpah himself.²⁶

CONCLUSION

Sam Peckinpah has claimed that every one of his films was autobiographical.²⁷ With that in mind, would the late Sam Peckinpah have anything that he would want to share with today's film students? I believe he would tell us to find our own voices, to carve out our own paths and to create films that do not imitate him or anybody else.

The following were Sam's words to an aspiring writer who had sent him drafts of screenplays for evaluation:

²³ Ibid 334

²⁴ Ibid 353

²⁵ David Weddle, *If They Move...Kill 'Em. The Life and Times of Sam Peckinpah* (New York, Grove Press 1994), 393

²⁶ Ibid, 398

²⁷ Ibid, 396

I felt that you found your stories, not from your own life and guts but in the silver screen of the past. You have a talent, now stop this nonsense and use it where it hurts – in your own heart.²⁸

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